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THE CUBAN MILITARY THREAT: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER THE CRISIS

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On October 28, 1962, the United States and Soviet Union reached terms for ending the Cuban Missile Crisis. But it was not until November 20 of that year that an implicit understanding on Cuba was reached between President Kennedy and Soviet leader Khrushchev. Although there was no formal understanding in the sense of a written or oral agreement, Kennedy described what he saw as the essence of the issue:

"As for our part if all offensive weapons systems are removed from Cuba and kept out of the hemisphere in the future, under adequate verification and safeguards, and if Cuba is not used for the export of aggressive Communist purposes, there will be peace in the Caribbean."

Yet for the past two decades Cuba has used Soviet military assistance to become a significant military presence in the Caribbean ("an unsinkable aircraft carrier," as some say) and also a major arms and manpower source for distant nations. By examining this activist foreign policy and the rationale behind it, this paper will consider whether Cuba and the Soviet Union have stood by the 1962 understanding.

CUBA'S MILITARY ROLE IN THE CARIBBEAN

Cuba derives its military and strategic importance from its key location. The Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico maritime routes carry about 55% of imported petroleum to the U.S. as well as approximately 45% of all U.S. seaborne trade, according to a joint Defense and State Department report. In addition, as the report notes, "in any NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation, more than half of all NATO resupply would be shipped from Gulf ports and would have to pass by Cuba."

Whether Cuba could successfully disrupt these shipping routes depends, in part, on its naval and air forces, which have benefited from generous Soviet arms transfers.

1.) The Naval Threat

o EQUIPMENT AND LOGISTICS

In its authoritative Handbook of the Cuban Armed Forces, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) calls the Cuban Navy "the only significant regional naval force in the Caribbean and one of the best-equipped and best-trained navies of Latin America."

Since 1979, the Cuban Navy has established, according to DIA, a credible bluewater antiship capability, including the acquisition of three FOXTROT Class diesel submarines and two KONI Class antisubmarine warfare frigates. In addition, the Navy can rely on the vessels of the Merchant and Fishing fleets, which could deploy sea mines in strategic areas.

For special operations, there is also a battalion-size force of about 800 elite naval troops trained for small-scale amphibious operations, which could rely on the POLNOCHNY Class medium landing ships. As DIA notes, this naval infantry unit gives the Cuban Navy a "ground combat force for the first time since the 1960s."

o MISSIONS AND TASKS

Although the Cuban Navy has far less capability than our own, it still presents several problems. The backbone of the Cuban force, according to a 1983 article in Navy International, is the large fleet of missile and torpedo craft along with the Koni-class frigates. By deploying its FOXTROT class submarines at positions of 100 nautical miles (nm) or more off its coasts and deploying the missile attack boats at 50 nm, the Cuban Navy could disrupt America's vital sea lines of communication.

In addition, as Soviet Military Power 1987 states, Cuba provides the Soviet Union with invaluable military platforms for staging operations: "At least nine deployments of BEAR D naval reconnaissance and five of BEAR F antisubmarine warfare aircraft were made to Cuba in 1986. The 26th deployment of a Soviet naval task force to the Caribbean began in October [1986]. The task force, which consisted of KARA-Class guided missile cruiser, a KASHIN-Class guided-missile destroyer, a FOXTROT-Class submarine, and a BORIS CHILIKIN-Class oiler, conducted antisurface, antisubmarine, and anti-air exercises with Cuban naval units during the month-long deployment."

2.) The Air Threat

o EQUIPMENT AND LOGISTICS

The Cuban Air and Defense Forces boasts at least 18,500 personnel organized in four branches. The DIA notes that Cuba's "inventory of high-performance aircraft alone includes over 200 Soviet-supplied fighter and interceptors."

The Cuban airforce relies on the advanced varieties of Soviet MiG-21/FISHBED and MiG-23/FLOGGER. Both carry underwing bombs and rockets in addition to the standard 23-mm Gatling gun; the FLOGGER, moreover, carries third-generation semi-active radar systems as well as advanced infrared homing systems. Cuba also relies on Soviet-made helicopters for close-in fire support and the transport of small units with equipment. As the DIA reports, the backbone of this helicopter force is composed of Mi-24/HIND attack squadrons, which are "the most advanced helicopter gunships produced by the Soviet Union."

o MISSIONS AND TASKS

According to DIA, the capabilities of these air units are more impressive than those of any other Latin American nation in the region. For example, the MiG-23s, with a combat radius of 520 nautical miles, are capable, as DIA notes, "of striking parts of the southeastern United States, much of northern Central America, most of the Caribbean nations, and northern South America."

The power-projection capabilities of these operations is evident in the large number of men Cuba could transport to the scene. DIA states that "the Cuban Air Force and civil air fleet could transport at least 15,000 combat soldiers anywhere in the Caribbean basin within two to three weeks." Some of the most crucial elements of this force, including the Special Troops, "could be in place within a few hours" by being parachuted into nearby countries.

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF CUBA'S MILITARY

Not only does Cuba present geostrategic threats to the U.S., but it also has supported the most radical movements in the Caribbean, serving as a funnel for Soviet bloc arms to the various armed factions. Consider the most notable cases:

-- GRENADA: Cuban and Soviet bloc aid came streaming toward Grenada in the wake of Maurice Bishop's 1979 coup against the prime minister of the country. Attempting to consolidate power for his party, the New Jewel Movement, Bishop set up a Marxist-Leninist state, which forcefully disbanded opposition parties and committed human rights abuses.

Only a month after Bishop seized power, the first shipment of Eastern-bloc manufactured arms arrived from Havana, including 3,400 rifles, 200 machine guns, 100 heavier weapons, and ammunition. By the time of the October 1983 rescue operation by the U.S., Grenada had more men under arms and more weapons and military supplies than all of its Eastern Caribbean neighbors combined. As captured documents revealed, this enormous buildup would have been to the benefit of both Cuba and the Soviet Union at the expense of the United States.

-- NICARAGUA: As was the case with Grenada's coup four months earlier, Cuba played a leading role with the Sandinista regime within hours of its coming to power. The most threatening aspect of Nicaragua's partnership with Cuba and the Soviet bloc has been the Sandinista's formidable military buildup.

Today, Nicaragua has the largest, most powerful military force in the history of Central America. Patterned after their Cuban benefactors, the Sandinista armed forces benefit from more than 3,000 Cuban, and more than 100 Soviet and East European, military and security advisers in Nicaragua.

-- EL SALVADOR: Cuban and Soviet bloc assistance to the Salvadoran insurgents has plagued the Salvadoran democracy. Fidel Castro was the first to organize the five competing insurgent factions. As a joint State and Defense Departments study reports, "[Castro] called a meeting in Havana in December 1979 at which three of the competing leftist Salvadoran factions pledged to forget their differences. Later, the two other factions joined, and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) was born ..."

In addition, as the DIA notes, the "Cubans have trained many FMLN members in guerrilla and military tactics in Cuba, and given political, organizational, and propaganda support to the FMLN."

CUBA'S INTERNATIONAL ROLE

In addition to the destabilizing role that Cuba plays in the Caribbean, it also has entangled itself in the affairs of nation's outside the region. In fact, only a year after taking power, Castro was providing arms, training, money, and other support to insurgents in Guatemala, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and Uruguay.

In order to understand why the Cubans have continually played such a significant military role overseas, consider Castro's vision of his regime. The DIA notes that he and other Cuban officials are convinced that "the best way to protect and sustain their revolutionary system is for other Third World nations to follow a similar political route." Accordingly, Castro has said that "Cuba has not refused nor will she ever refuse support to the revolutionary movement."

In attempting to fulfill these ambitions, Cuba today has about five times as many Cuban soldiers in Africa alone as there were in the Cuban armed forces that Castro toppled in 1959. Consider the following:

-- ANGOLA: In early November 1975, Castro ordered the first dispatch of combat troops to assist the Angolan government. By mid-1976, Castro had increased this contingent to 33,000-36,000 men, where it remains today.

-- ETHIOPIA: In late 1977, Castro sent military forces to support the leftist regime in Addis Ababa. As in Angola, the advisers, numbering some 3,000, were soon followed by organized military units.

-- SOUTH YEMEN: In 1985, following the dictates of a 1972 agreement, Cuba sent 500 military advisers to train the government's land, air, and naval troops.

CONCLUSION

An activist Cuban state, with a burgeoning military arsenal, is clearly not in America's national interest. Yet, despite the 1962 understanding, that is precisely what Cuba has become. With arms and men scattered around the globe, Cuba is today a major and threatening player not only in the Caribbean, but also in nations as far away as Angola and South Yemen.

In view of the recent observance of the twenty-fifth anniversary of both the Cuban missile crisis and the Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding, it's worthwhile to reflect on the enormity of Cuba's regional and international role and how far that country has strayed from its 1962 commitments.